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ABSTRACT

An overview of the skills, techniques, tools, and compensation of language translators and interpreters is offered. It begins with a definition of translation and a brief history of translation in the western world. Basic principles of translation dating back to Roman writers are also outlined. A five-step process in producing a good translation are then described in greater detail: (1) determining the nature of the text; (2) amplifying the text in the original (source) language; (3) producing a rough but complete translation in the target language; (4) producing an idiomatic translation in the target language; and (5) testing the effectiveness of the translation. A discussion of the tools of translation considers the importance of general reference materials in both source and target languages, dictionaries, and extensive and continuous reading in both source and target languages. The labor-intensive nature of translation is noted, and some basic guidelines for per-page translation costs are provided. (MSE)

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TRANSLATION: ELEMENTS OF A CRAFT

By

Mazin A. Heiderson

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation

I was sitting an exam
In a dead language
And I had to translate myself
From man into ape.
I played it cool,
First translating a text
From a forest.

But the translation got harder
As I drew nearer to myself.
With some effort
I found, however, satisfactory equivalents
For nails and the hair of the feet.

Around the knees
I started to stammer.
Towards the heart my hand began to shake
And blotted the paper with light.

Still, I tried to patch it up
With the hair of the chest,
But utterly failed
At the soul.

Marin Sorescu, Rumanian Poet
(Translated by T. Cribb)[1]

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Most people who know two languages can translate well but, in fact, don't. Their first attempt usually proves their last. Many will say that translating is difficult and boring, a task for bookish persons with a meager social life. But translation has been part of the work of the world since the New Stone Age, about 10,000 years ago. Indeed, trade is impossible without it. Unlike other crafts, its products are not used directly. It is a means to other ends. One translates

[1] G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language & Translation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.254.

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commercial agreements, political treaties, sacred texts, informative news and entertaining literature, but no one translates just to translate. The dependence on other activities for the value of their work is reflected in the background of translators. They come from all specialties. Their ranks include reporters, soldiers, writers, accountants, administrators, teachers, preachers and diplomats.

Nearly all translators drift into their work by chance. After working in another field, individuals who know two languages are called upon to make their work intelligible to speakers of other languages. They do it as part of their other job. Those who like the work and prove adept at it may switch temporarily or permanently and become professional translators. The only training most translators receive is on the job experience. As a rule, they guard the "tricks" of their trade carefully and regard its mastery as a gift from above.

II. TRANSLATION DEFINED

Translation consists of replacing a written message in one language (source language) with the same message in another language (target language). The historical development of different languages and the uneven abilities of translators usually preclude a perfect equivalent. Invariably, the transfer involves a loss in meaning related to the claims of each language. The basic loss lies on a continuum between overtranslation (increased detail) and undertranslation (increased generality).[2]

III. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The history of western translation is divided into four periods. The first extends from Roman times to the publication of Alexander Tytler's ***Essay On the Principles of Translation*** in 1791. During this period, which includes the Protestant Reformation and the great Biblical translators, observations on translation came from practioners of the craft. Tytler ushered in a second period, which ended in 1940 with the first attempts at machine translation. For the first time translation comes into its own as a subject. Writers suggested rules and principles for successful practice. The third period began with publications on machine translation in the 1940s and lasted until the early 1960s. It includes research on communication theory and structural linguistics. The fourth and last period extends from the mid-1960s until the present. It is characterized by attempts to gain a fuller understanding of translation through interdisciplinary research into the nature and function of human language and human communication.[3]

IV. TRANSLATION PRINCIPLES

Cicero, Horace and other Roman writers held that a translator should render the text sense for sense and not word for word. The collapse of Moorish Spain spurred translation of Arabic and classical Greek authors into Latin. At great risk to personal safety, making the Bible accessible to the general population in the vernacular occupied the attention of European translators during the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther is credited with having established the core of German identity and nationality through his translation of the Bible. To a lesser degree, the King James Bible along with other works of the period provided the same service for English.

In 1540, the French Humanist, Etienne Dolet, proposed five principles in ***How to Translate Well from One Language into Another:***

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[2] P. Newmark, *Approaches to Translation*, New York: Pergamon Press, 1981, p. 7.

[3] S. Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies*, New York: Methuen, Inc., 1980, pp. 40-42.

"1. The translator should fully understand the meaning of the original, although he is free to clarify obscurities.
2. The translator should possess a perfect knowledge of both the original language and the target language.
3. The translator should avoid word-for-word renderings.
4. The translator should use forms of speech in common use.
5. The translator should choose and order words to produce the correct tone."[4]

Six years later, Dolet was executed by the Inquisition for heresy on a charge of "mistranslating" one of Plato's Dialogues in such a way as to imply disbelief in immortality.[5]

George Chapman, the most famous English translator, was celebrated by John Keats in his poem ***On First Looking into Chapman's Homer.*** In the dedication to the ***Seven Books*** in 1598, Chapman wrote:

> "The work of a skillful and worthy translator is to observe the sentences, figures and formes of speech of his author, his true sense and height, and to adorne them with figures and formes of oration fitted to the original in the same tongue to which they are translated."[6]

Although modern theorists and linguists have tried to advance translation as a science, they haven't improved on the principles suggested by the first English translation theorist, Alexander Fraser Tytler, in his ***Essay On The Principles of Translation***:

"1. The translator should give a complete transcript of the idea of the original work.
2. The style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original.
3. The translation should have all the ease of the original composition."[7]

V. TRANSLATION STEPS

There are five steps to producing a good translation. Some steps can be done mentally, some steps may be combined, but none may be skipped without harming the result. These steps are:

A. Determining the nature of the text.
B. Amplifying the text in the original language (source language).
C. Producing a rough but complete translation in the target language.
D. Producing an idiomatic translation in the target language.
E. Testing the effectiveness of the translation.

A. <u>Determining Nature of Text</u>

Reading the text or significant samples of it if it is too long, is a requisite for determining its nature. The translator decides how language functions in the text:

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[4] Bassnett-McGuire, p. 54.

[5] Bassnett-McGuire, p. 54.

[6] Bassnett-McGuire, pp. 54-55.

[7] A. F. Tytler, *Essay On the Principles of Translation*, New York: Dutton & Co., 1907, p. 9.

1. **Expressive** - This is the "I" form of language; it includes personal or intimate writing, serious literature, and authoritative statements such as speeches and declarations.

2. **Descriptive** - This is the "it" form of language; it includes journalistic accounts, scientific and technical writing, general textbooks, and non-literary works where facts are more important than style.

3. **Persuasive** - This is the "you" form of language; it includes advertising, propaganda, popular literature, polemical works, notices, instructions, and rules and regulations.[8]

The level of formal education and cultural background of the intended reader completes the overall picture of the translator's task. While the nature of the material can be gleaned from the text itself, it is helpful to discuss the material and its intended use with the client. As is often the case, intended reader and client are not the same. Then the translator must clarify the nature of the assignment and negotiate the type of effect desired with the client and how it will be evaluated. This juncture also affords an opportunity for the client to correct flaws or weaknesses in the original.

B. Amplifying Text in Source Language

Often omitted by amateurs and neophytes, amplifying the text means expanding and clarifying the text by supplying definitions, augmenting culture specific items (slogans and sayings) with descriptions or examples, rewriting jargon, spelling out acronyms and making all aspects of the original comprehensible to the general reader. This step makes the text easier to translate as well as improves the accuracy of the translation.

If a text is well written, no matter what the style and subject, the translator must respect its formal components and account for them fully. The translator is, however, entitled to treat the formal aspects of a badly written text with considerable freedom. He or she may replace clumsy with elegant structures, remove redundant items, reduce cliches and vogue words to plainer language and clarify the emphasis by tightening the sentences.[9]

In ***Translation: Applications & Research***[10], Richard Brislin summarized the rules translators suggest for writing "translatable English." Translatable English is a form of the language that is easier to translate than corresponding texts in which these rules are not followed:

"1. Use short, simple sentences of less than 16 words.
2. Employ the active rather than the passive words.
3. Repeat nouns instead of using pronouns.
4. Avoid metaphor and colloquialisms. Such phrases are least likely to have equivalents in the target language.
5. Avoid the subjunctive mood (e.g., verb forms with could, would).
6. Add sentences that provide context for key ideas. Reword key phrases to provide redundancy.

[8] P. Newmark, pp. 12-16.

[9] P. Newmark, pp. 127-128.

[10] R. Brislin (ed.), *Translation: Applications & Research*, New York: Gardner Press, 1976.

7. Avoid adverbs and prepositions telling where or when (e.g., frequent, beyond, upper).
8. Avoid possessive forms wherever possible.
9. Use specific rather than general terms (e.g., the specific animal such as cows, chickens, pigs, rather than the general term livestock).
10. Avoid words indicating vagueness regarding some event or thing (e.g., probably, frequently).
11. Use wording familiar to the translators wherever possible.
12. Avoid sentences with two different verbs if the verbs suggest two different actions."[11]

C. Producing Rough Translation in Target Language

The goal of the third step is to arrive at a complete, if awkward, transfer of meaning from the source language to the target language. This version will contain repetitions, stylistically inconsistent sentences and will be longer than needed to convey the message of the text. Using a cooking analogy, the rough translation may be thought of as a complete set of ingredients ill-prepared and unattractively presented. The average person will recognize this type of translation as the mongrel prose of the typical instruction booklets and directions that come with imported consumer products.

The unit of language is neither the individual sound nor the individual word but the sentence. It communicates the message through ideas and concepts. Consequently, the unit of language corresponds roughly to the unit of thought.[12]

D. Producing Idiomatic Translation in Target Language

Step four "naturalizes" the language of the rough translation into the forms and culture of the new language. Sentences and terms natural to the target language replace the residual constructions of the source language. Traces of word-for-word translations disappear. The translator compresses the rough draft and rewrites it as an original composition in the target language.

The same act requires a different word or expression even in related languages. In English you "pay" a visit, but in the Romance languages you "make" it. In English you "take" a walk, but in French you "make" it and in Spanish you "give" it. In English you "take" an examination, but in Italian you "give" it, in French you "undergo" it, in Spanish you "suffer" it. The Russian "How much to you of summers?" or the Spanish "How many years have you?" strikes English speakers as peculiar for "How old are you?" But to Romance and Slavic speakers, "The child is two years old." sounds funny. They wonder, "How can a child of two be old?"[13]

In his Dedication to the ***Aenies*** in 1697, John Dryden wrote: "I have endeavored to make Virgil speak such English as he would himself have spoken, if he had been born in England, and in this present age."[14] Because of the skill required for writing in the target language, this step is often performed by a second translator with acknowledged writing ability.

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[11] R. Brislin (ed.), p. 22.

[12] M. Pei, *The Story of Language*, New York: Meridian Books, 1984, p.40.

[13] M. Pei, pp. 430-431.

[14] Bassnett-McGuire, p. 60.

Many well-known English translators, especially when working with exotic or dead languages, have relied on rough or "approximate" translations into known European languages. George Chapman, Edward Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound and John Gardner made liberal use of the works of others to produce poems from Greek, Persian, Chinese and Sumerian respectively.

E. Testing Effectiveness of Translation

Evaluating the effectiveness of the translation saves embarrassment, time and money. Serve no translation before its time !! And that time comes after it is field tested on a sample of intended users or a comparable group. An oral check on reading comprehension is preferable to a written test, because it allows for clarifications and more nearly approximates the actual use of most texts. One of the following two tests would probably suffice:

1. **Reading & Retelling** - Ask target language speakers to read the entire text or representative samples of it and then to orally rephrase the content in their own words. The retelling should correspond to the ideas of the original in content and emphasis.

2. **Reading & Answering Oral Questions** - Ask target language speakers to read the entire text or representative samples of it and then ask comprehension questions about the main ideas and supporting details. Depending on the nature of the text, these questions may be literal or inferential.

Two other tests have been used to determine the effectiveness of a translation, but these should be used in addition to and not instead of one of the above. They could be considered internal rather than external tests of effectiveness.

3. **Back Translation** - This consists of trying to recreate the original message by transferring the target language version back to the source language without looking at the original. Back translation gets at the question of the accuracy of the translation.

4. **Translation Awareness** - Considered by professional translators to be the ultimate test of their skill, it consists of the inability of the intended users to tell that the target language version was initially composed in another language. Translation awareness reflects the degree of success the translator had in producing an idiomatic version in the target language.

VI. TRANSLATION TOOLS & SKILLS

The tools of the translator include reference books and various types of dictionaries in both the source language and the target language. In the popular mind, a translator just reaches for a bilingual dictionary, e.g. Spanish-English, and starts looking-up unfamiliar words to produce a good English equivalent in the target language. This is wrong. Professional translators begin with trying to understand the text in the source language. The tools needed for this phase are source language reference works that deal with the subject of the text.

Next in utility are monolingual dictionaries in the source language. For the general reader, the "Student" size or the "High School" dictionary is best. These are often superior to "Collegiate"

dictionaries in the clarity and care with which they define their entries. The next most useful tools are target language reference works and monolingual dictionaries. After these are specialized bilingual dictionaries such as an Engish-German Engineering dictionary. The least useful tool is a general bilingual dictionary.

Ignoring reference works in the source or the target language virtually guarantees that the translation will be rough and difficult to understand. A good example is **The Psychology of the Child** by Jean Piaget and Barbel Inhelder, translated from the French by Helen Weaver.[15] In the Preface the authors state their purpose in writing the work:

> "In this volume we have tried to present, as briefly and as clearly as possible, a synthesis, or a summing up, of our work in child psychology. A book such as this seemed to us particularly desirable since our published studies have been spread out over a number of volumes, some of them fairly difficult to read. This little book, of course, is not meant to be a substitute for reading the other volumes. But it represents, we believe, a useful introduction to the questions we have studied and will enable the reader to gain an adequate understanding of what we have learned in our investigations."

There can be no doubt that this little volume of 160 pages was intended to be a clear and accessible introduction to the work of a renowned psychologist, whose research has a bearing on child development, psychology and linguistics. Yet, the English translation, in print since 1969 by a major publisher, is loaded with word for word renditions and mongrel constructions that can only be described as "Franglish." Weaver repeatedly refers to the language of three to six year old children as "infantile language" and even quotes English speaking linguists as using the term.[16] Elsewhere, the reader is treated to expressions such as "structuration," which have no existence in the English lexicon.[17] For example, "... on the level of cooperation and mutual respect there is a striking parallelism between these operations and the structuration of moral values."[18]

Infant and "l'enfant" are English/French homonyms that enjoy different usages in these related languages. In French, "l'enfant" is a general term for child but in English "infant" refers to the earliest stage childhood, generally from birth to six weeks.[19] A quick check of references in linguistics, psychology or child development in English including those cited by Piaget and Inhelder in their book would have told the translator that "infantile language" is rendered as "child language" in English.[20] "Structuration" turns out to be a direct import from French, which may be rendered as "organization or patterning" in English. While badly translated works are still useful, their reading imposes an additional obstacle on the user and demands a compensatory effort best reserved for the content.

Translating requires an excellent command of two languages, and most of us do not command even one. Dictionaries are of limited help, because most words in one language have a dozen possible translations in another, which means that to use a dictionary properly you must first have command of the two languages, in which case you may not need the dictionary.[21] A translator

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[15] J. Piaget and B. Inhelder (translated by Helen Weaver), New York: Basic Books, 1969.

[16] J. Piaget and B. Inhelder (tr. H. Weaver), pp. 85-86 & 110.

[17] J. Piaget and B. Inhelder (tr. H. Weaver), pp. 79, 107, 127 & 129.

[18] J. Piaget and B. Inhelder (tr. H. Weaver), p. 127.

[19] B. White, *The First Three Years of Life*, New York: Prentice- Hall, Inc., pp. 14-31.

[20] A. Bar-Adon and W. Leopold (ed.), Child Language: A Book of Readings, Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971.

[21] M. Pei, p. 427.

should read widely in the source language and in the target language. For living languages, this should include a daily newspaper and intimate familiarity with the works of two major authors of the not too distant past such as Charles Dickens for English. Putting the translated text into the idiom of the target language of three generations ago gives the translation an "at home" feeling in the new language. Readers will mentally substitute the time divide between their own expression and the slightly antique version of the text for the cultural divide between the two languages.[22]

VII. COST

Translation is labor intensive, expensive and necessary. In the field of science alone, the National Science Foundation spends several million dollars each year to produce English transcripts of about half a million pages of foreign scientific literature. Since 1959, this project has included thirty-seven Russian, one Chinese, and two Japanese science journals along with numerous translations from western languages.

To translate into the five official languages the 20 million words spoken during the seven-week meeting of the UN General Assembly, 100 million sheets of paper have to be used. A one-hour English speech requires about 400 man hours by 124 different persons before it can be permanently recorded in English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese. On average, it takes three translators 18 man hours to get an English speech into Russian, and one translator 30 man hours to put it into Chinese.[23]

The going rate for translating general non-fiction from English into common European languages such as Spanish is about $100 for every single-spaced typed page. More exotic non-European languages such as Arabic cost twice that much. And it usually costs from one-third to one-half again as much to translate from the language of a more technologically developed society into a language of a less developed society. In such cases, the translator has to coin words and research the history of the target language for acceptable new construction. So if Arabic into English costs $200 a page, English into Arabic would cost $300 a page.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Translation can be done well if the translator follows the five steps in sequence and uses the right tools at the right time. He or she must determine the nature of the text, amplify the text in the original language, produce a rough translation in the target language, produce an idiomatic version in the target language and test the effectiveness of the translation. In the end, the skill to translate well resolves itself in the ability to write well in the target language. Knowledge of contemporary usage through wide reading that includes journalistic prose is invaluable for developing a precise and attractive style. It is best to learn an art from its practitioners and for writing that means journalist and novelists. The translator who prepares for his or her craft will produce competent translations; and, in moments of grace, may stumble on perfect equivalents between languages.

This paper was presented at the 17th Annual Michigan Bilingual/Migrant Education Conference held at EasternMichigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan on April 21-23, 1994.

[22] Steiner, pp. 364-367.

[23] M. Pei, pp. 431-432.